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ABSTRACT

Because the term feminism linguistically narrows the essence of woman's existence when it is used consistently to describe female writing that deals with individual freedom and considered choices, it is essential to distinguish between feminism and existentialism. While feminism is primarily concerned with women in the context of a dominant male society, existentialism is a broader term that characterizes an individual's awareness of life's choices and an eventual definition of one's life according to a "meaningful context." Therefore, the female writer or the female fictional character who chooses her way of life, who suffers the anxiety associated with freedom, isolation, and nonconformity and still remains free, demonstrates the tenets of existentialism. Some examples of novels that contain existential heroines include the writings of Kate Chopin, Joan Didion, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Drabble. To describe as feminist these women whose views and actions coincide with the philosophy of existentialism is limiting and therefore sexist. (MAI)

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Existentialism and Feminism

Mary P. Hiatt

"The problem of freedom is in a sense a practical problem.... [we] are free to choose, not only what to do on a specific occasion, but what to value and how to live."[1]

"Actually, things will be as [we] have decided they are to be....First, I should involve myself; then, act on the old saw, 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.'"[2]

"The ultimate meaning of the acts of honest [people] is the quest for freedom as such."[3]

"The modern world is a waste land, but the world never has been--and never will be--a flower garden. What we make of that is largely up to us."[4]

These statements could easily be taken for comments on and support for the doctrine or philosophy of feminism. Feminism, as we all know, is concerned with individual freedom, with considered choices--however they may go against cultural mores--, with self-reliance and self-identity, as these concepts apply to women.

And yet the statements I have cited are in fact explanations and ideas expressed by various philosophers, including Sartre, as tenets of existentialism. Each time the words "we" or "people" occur in a statement, the original word is "men."

Existential philosophy is not easy to pin down. There

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are disagreements among its various proponents, as well as differences in emphasis. Nonetheless, a brief summary is in order, for there is common ground among the various factions. Individual human awareness of life choices and the "emptiness" of an unexamined life are the two basic tenets of existentialism agreed upon most frequently. Faced by death and lacking a "meaningful" context, we are forced to define our own lives. But to live one's life according to one's own dictates often results in considerable anxiety, for true freedom is frightening. It is, in other words, often easier or safer not to see choices. Freedom frequently entails rebellion against societal mores or withdrawal from society, au fond also a form of rebellion. The chooser, the free person, is thus likely to be regarded as a rebel or a recluse.

To be free, however, one cannot live according to the opinions and considerations of others. The free, self-reliant person, despite anxiety, has no crutches. The existentialist, searching for a meaningful, non-automatic life, engaging in Socratic self-examination, undergoing the terrors of aloneness, nonetheless feels a kind of peace, a kind of strength and worth, if only from having undergone the struggle. Life is absurd, says the existentialist; I will nevertheless live it with as much sensitivity, awareness, and freedom as I can, for death is the one certainty we have.

This attempt to present a simple formulation of the basic

aspects of existentialism, however, might equally well have been an attempt to formulate many of the basic aspects of feminism. There are differences between existentialism and feminism, which I will deal with subsequently, but the point I am making here is that the overlap is tremendous.

And yet it is the male existentialists who are existentialists, and the female existentialists who are feminists. Even Beauvoir is considered primarily a feminist. The essence of women's existence is thus linguistically narrowed. In fact, the implication is strong that women do not "exist" on the same lofty philosophical level as men because their "feminist" concerns limit them. To the extent, therefore, that the term "feminism" fulfills an exclusionary or diminishing intention, it is a sexist term.

The female writer or female fictional character who chooses her way of life, who suffers the anxiety associated with freedom, isolation, and non-conformity, but who is nevertheless free, is regarded as a feminist. The male writer or male fictional character of the same ilk is regarded as an existentialist. We have all heard of existential heroes. Literature teems with its Meursaults and Holden Caulfields. Why have we not heard of existential heroines? Because we have heard of feminist heroines instead.

Nora's escape from the doll's house, for example, is regarded as an early expression of feminism. A woman finally

sees and rebels against the mockery of her conventional marital life, with all its conventional role-playing. When Nora leaves, however, she is not merely escaping. She does not know what she is going to, but she has chosen to go from. In this way, she begins to achieve her selfhood, her identity. Freedom is difficult, and she has no illusions about that fact, but she is condemned to it, as Sartre has pointed out, because she sees it. It is there and she must deal with it. She will never again automatically go through the motions of what passes for life, for her life is all she has. Of this, she is well aware. And yet Nora is never termed an existentialist.

In Alberto Moravia's novel, The Empty Canvas, the male protagonist, Dino, suffers from a form of existential anxiety that consists of a stultifying awareness of his own nullity.[5] Dino has no particular talents, although he sporadically attempts to paint as a way of existing. He is ultimately able to rid himself of his obsessions and to feel at peace with himself. Whether or not he becomes an artist is moot; but in a sense, he does adopt an existential mode.

Contrasted with Dino in the same novel, however, is the young Cecilia--free, open, warm, in touch with her own feelings, and unconcerned with conventional entrapments. The problem that Dino has with her is specifically that she won't be tied down and won't be anyone's property. By her existential mode of life, she obsesses Dino. And until he learns from her what it is to

be free, he regards her as something of a whore, not even a feminist.

Consider also the case of Edna Pointellier, Kate Chopin's protagonist in The Awakening. It has been pointed out that even though Edna is able to emerge from conventional dependency situation, she is never quite able to "find herself," as the phrase goes, and therefore does not succeed in "justifying" her own existence.[6] Edna's attempts to become an artist, like Dino's, result in failure. But Dino, a male, does not have to be an artist. Edna, a female, feels that she must be one or the other--the conventional wife and mother or the talented artist. Edna has left her family to live alone, and she has achieved a certain amount of freedom. She is nagged, however, with a sense of her nothingness, her own lack of inspiration and genius, and she chooses to end her life. In this way, she is confessing, according to Camus, that life is too much for her. Through suicide, she attempts to "settle the absurd,"[7] the ridiculousness of a universe without design or final answers. She has negated the small design of her own little universe; it is absurd. But she cannot cope with the lack of design, with, in effect, her own freedom, in the larger universe. The crises, anxieties, and choices that Edna undergoes, however, are basically existential. The Awakening is nevertheless overwhelmingly regarded as a feminist novel.

Or consider the case of Maria Wyeth, the central character

in Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays. Maria's entrapment is not dissimilar to Dino's. She struggles with her growing sense of nullity and eventually is able to take charge of her own life and make independent choices. Like Edna, Maria is not vastly talented; unlike Edna, she realizes that "every day is all there is,"[8] and that every day is of her own making, without any necessity to justify her actions. Throughout the novel, it is Maria who is assumed to be suicidal, but who chooses to live because she can tolerate the absurd. It is the male character, BZ, who, perceiving the same emptiness within himself, chooses to end his life, who attempts to end the absurd with his death. Nevertheless, Maria is thought of as a "feminist" heroine, not as an existentialist.

There are other so-called feminist heroines whose center of concern and awareness is existential. I think of Margaret Atwood's protagonist in Surfacing, a novel that is consistently thought of as feminist. The protagonist goes on a literal and symbolic search for her father. She discovers that such a search is fruitless, for all attempts to discover or reclaim her mysteriously disappeared father lead her back to herself. In other words, she ceases trying to find the identity of the prototypical male "other" and does find her own identity. She is "a woman who....pushes to the outer limits of her existence in order to discover the self."[9] She states: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that, I can do nothing."[10]

I also think of Margaret Drabble's Frances Wingate, in Realms of Gold; of Faith, in Grace Paley's Enormous Changes at the last Minute; of Charlotte, in Anne Tyler's Earthly Possessions. There are myriads of others, all the way back to Antigone.

At this point, however, it is time to explore the differences in meaning between the two terms, "feminism" and "existentialism."

There is one over-riding difference, I believe. The feminist is primarily concerned with women in the context of crippling assumptions promulgated by a dominant, male society. The feminist's metaphorical antagonists are thus masculine power and masculine enslavement. It is a battle of women against all enslaving males. In such a struggle, the existential choices necessarily seem fewer. It is difficult to maintain that the oppressed, of whatever nature, have the same options as the oppressors. Victims cannot be choosers.

But often, in this regard, we women might look at the enemy and find out that it is "us." For we have internalized the masculine assumptions and requirements as to the way a life should be led so that if we opt not to follow a conventional route, we are often constrained to justify ourselves in other ways. Vide Edna Pointellier. To put it rather more graphically, a woman still tends to feel that she must have some valid reason or excuse for being a rebel, for being "unconventional." The man who decides to be a beach-bum might well be

thought of as an existentialist; the woman who chooses the same life is simply a mess--and as long as women accept this judgment, we are playing "their" game and are culpable too.

The true existentialist, however, is often also engaged in a struggle, that of the individual in the context of assumptions promulgated by society. The existentialist is not an oppressor. He or, by the same token, she also feels oppressed and is also combatting certain forces. The existentialist's battle focuses on collective societal assumptions or on authoritarian demands that inhibit, deflect, or destroy individual freedom. The existentialist's antagonists are any kind of mindless power or enslavement. It is a battle of thoughtful and free people against the thoughtlessness, Babbitry, and meaninglessness of other people.

Insofar as both the feminists and existentialists struggle with the basic questions of choice and freedom, therefore,--the only questions in the face of death--the terms differ mainly in the identification of the antagonists.

Diana Trilling has pointed out that, "The pursuit of the white whale is now claimed as a female prerogative too; women now hunt the white whale of female selfhood as men have always sought the white whale of male selfhood."[11] Although Trilling's statement is irrefutably true, I find myself objecting to the underlying implication that "selfhood" is a matter of gender. Selfhood is selfhood. Period.

I also wonder whether it is only "now" that women are claiming the pursuit of the white whale. There have always been existential women.

Vivian Gornick goes even further than Trilling in her views of women's search for the existential white whale. She says, "It will take a hundred years and more to produce a generation of American women born only into the same existential miseries as men, liberated out of the special subjugation of second-class citizenship."[12] In her assumption of a kind of elitist existential misery that excludes women, Gornick falls into a linguistic trap herself. Instead of recognizing that the term "existential" is being used in an exclusionary manner and objecting to that use, she prefers to adopt a tone of combined irony and self-pity. Poor us, she is saying; we should be so lucky as to have only those effete little masculine existential anxieties.

She may indeed be correct that there has been no generation of women born into existential miseries. But by the same token, there is no generation of men born into these miseries either. The point is that there <u>are</u> existentialists. There <u>are</u> existential characters in fiction. There are real people and fictional people who know that we all die, that we all really live alone, that there are no final answers, that we have the onerous task of choosing for ourselves, that we are burdened with the anxieties of freedom--but that there is no other way to selfhood, no other way to exist.

Whether these real people and fictional people are women or men makes no difference. The existential view is available

to both sexes. To describe as feminists those women whose views and actions coincide with the philosophy of existentialism makes no more sense than to describe existential men as masculinists.

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Notes

[1]Mary Warnock, Existentialism (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 1-2.

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 31.

[3]Ibid., p. 45.

[4]Walter Kaufman, From Shakespeare to Existentialism (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 23.

[5]Alberto Moravia, The Empty Canvas (New York: Manor Books, Inc., 1973). Dino refers to "a lack of contact, not only with things, but with myself." (p. 14)

[6]Paula Berggren, "'A Lost Soul': Work Without Hope in The Awakening," Regionalism and the Female Imagination, 3 (Spring 1977), 1-7.

[7]Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), p. 48.

[8]Excerpt from interview with Joan Didion in The New York Times, April 1977. The words are those of Didion herself and not attributed to a fictional character.

[9]Josie P. Campbell, "The Woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing," Mosaic, 11 (Spring 1978), 18.

[10]Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Popular Library, 1972), p. 222.

Notes (cont.)

[11]Quoted by Francine DuPlessix Gray, "The New Penelope," The New York Times, May 14, 1978, p. 3.

[12]Quoted by Stephen Singular, "Moving On," The New York Times Magazine, April 30, 1978, p. 38.